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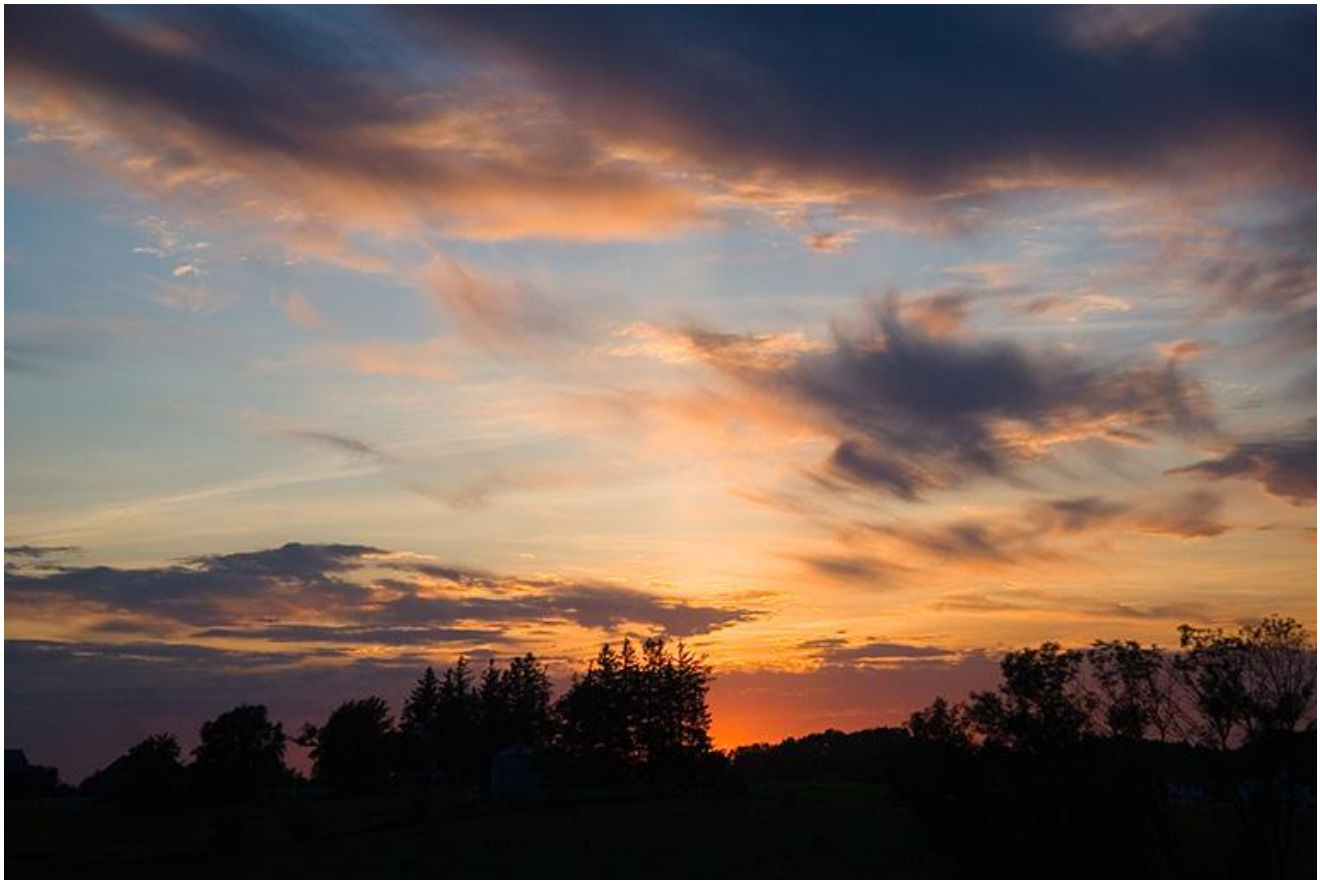
Herbert Hoover National Historic Site
West Branch, Iowa

Reflections of a Neophyte Prairie Topophiliac

By Dr. Gaynell Gavin
2011 Artist-in-Residence at Herbert Hoover National Historic Site



Herbert Hoover National Historic Site
110 Parkside Drive
PO Box 607
West Branch, Iowa 52358

Phone: (319) 643-2541
Website: www.nps.gov/heho

Reflections of a Neophyte Prairie Topophiliac

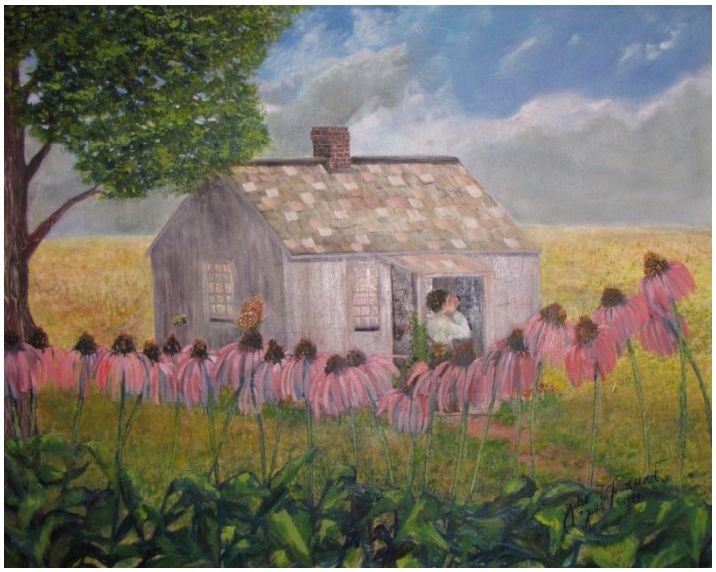
In the summer of 2009, I saw prairie stretching as far as I could see. In some abstract sense, I had known for a long time that the land on which I grew up was once prairie, but the experience of seeing tallgrass prairie as it may once have been changed me forever.

Although I live and teach in the South, most summers I am drawn back to the Midwest. In June of 2007, within a couple of miles of my childhood home, I saw a friend's latest prairie restoration project. Having been involved in restoration for over twenty years, she had recently converted nearly all of her large rural front yard into native prairie. I was impressed that year and again in 2008 when fireflies at dusk delighted my five-year old grandson, and my eight-year old granddaughter pointed out a purple coneflower to my sister, announcing, “That is echinacea. It has medicinal properties.” But not until 2009 were my friend's native flowers and grasses taller than I am so that, from some points, I could see only prairie. That new sight, on ground where I had stood many times, felt paradoxically familiar. It was a holistic experience, bringing the aesthetic, affective, and environmental together for me.

While our country's traditional prairie story has been mostly one of conquest, I wanted to know more of that story's depth and nuance. It was the eighty acres of tallgrass prairie at the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site that led me to apply to the site's artist-in-residency program. As an artist-in-residence, I was not disappointed, but to discover prairie is to discover the sorrow of massive loss, along with beauty and usefulness, in the face of human destruction. In Iowa, which once had about 30 million acres of prairie, and in my home state of Illinois, which had about 22 million, less than one per cent remains (McClain 9). Before European settlement, tallgrass prairie “covered. . .the northern two thirds of Illinois, [and] almost all of Iowa. . .” (Madson 21).

Stanford University biologist Paul Ehrlich warns about dangers of plant and animal species loss, which remove "life support services [such as disease control] that we need from biodiversity"; offering the analogy of an airplane, which can still fly if some rivets are pulled from the wings, he says "it's nuttier than hell to keep removing them" since no one is sure which rivets, if pulled, will make the wings fall off (Stanford).

As we work to preserve small remnants of original prairie and to restore some of what has been lost, our country's prairie story is not yet completely written. In addition to stopping loss of prairie plant and animal genotypes that could be used in agriculture or medicine, another concern that prairie restoration addresses is stopping and preventing erosion, whether as quotidian as dirt sliding downhill into a parking lot or as devastating as the Dust Bowl. "[W]hile natural prairie grasses can survive a drought the wheat that was planted could not and, when the precipitation fell, it shriveled and died exposing bare earth to the winds. This was the ultimate cause of the wind erosion and terrible dust storms that hit the Plains in the 1930s" (Cook, Miller, and Seeger). I am especially aware of erosion as an impetus for prairie restoration in both Illinois and Iowa. Concerns about species diversity and erosion are more than adequate reasons for prairie preservation and restoration, but there are other reasons also.



Human beings create narrative to make meaning of our experience. A continuing work-in-progress, our national prairie narrative is a complicated story. Even as I wonder why we have destroyed prairies nearly to the point of nonexistence, I recognize the danger of romanticizing my prairie narrative. I do not worry that my family will starve without conversion of prairie to farmland, nor do I have to cross prairie miles facing suffocating heat, the possibility of forty-foot walls of lightning-sparked flames, or biting winter

winds. Yet people survived on prairie land before European settlement, and among those who brought European settlement to the prairie, some did express sorrow at its destruction (McClain 9). Having "learned to love the wild face of what they were destroying," they "reserved little patches of prairie that they would never plow" (Madson 45). Many expressed attachment to and love for its beauty. One of those was Herbert Hoover's maternal aunt Ann Minthorn Heald, who moved with her family from Canada to Iowa in 1859 when she was not quite seventeen. Over sixty-five years later, she recalled "rolling along in our covered wagon across the prairies of Iowa to our new home" in late March.

> *We had not dreamed it could be so wonderful. As far as the eye can see in every direction, the prairies reach to the horizon. In spring and summer, it is one vast carpet of. . . wild flowers of many kinds and colors, dotting the luxurious prairie grasses.*
>
> *The immense lawn is broken here and there by little groves of wild crabapple, plum, and cherry trees. . . (Rensch 12)*

Hamlin Garland, who grew up in prairie states, particularly Iowa, definitely did not romanticize them, describing his parents' lives there as consisting of "Only Toil and Deprivation" and "Silent Heroism" in the dedication of his 1922 novel, *Main Travelled Roads.* Although Garland referred to prairie as dreary and desolate, even he spoke also of tangled "songs of the larks and bobolinks and blackbirds" in the novel's epigraph. When I walk on Iowa prairie in early June, swarms of gnats and mosquitos are sensory reminders that I do not have to face the prairie's frequent insect bites and sweaty heat unless I choose to; but red-winged blackbirds, purple spiderwort, white Canadian anemone, white indigo, and rolling landscape are among countless vivid reminders that our national prairie narrative is about light and joy as well as loss and sorrow. Prairie has much to tell us literally and metaphorically about restoration in the face of deracination, about managing loss and rebuilding. It has much to tell us about preservation and survival through deep, resilient, strong roots.

“[A] land that blazed with light and space,” prairie is frequently associated with light (Madson 21). Judge James Hall's 1839 description of early Iowa offers an example.

> *The scenery of the prairie is striking and never fails to cause an exclamation of surprise. The extent of the prospect is exhilarating. The outline of the landscape is sloping and graceful. The verdure and the flowers are beautiful; the absence of shade, and consequent appearance of profusion of light produce a gaiety. . . (qtd. in Madson 15).*

Recently I drove to Iowa's Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge and walked the Tallgrass Trail because I wanted to know what being surrounded by eight thousand acres of restored prairie looks and feels like. The day was overcast, without a clearer day's “profusion of light,” but the prairie was otherwise as Hall described. I did find the outline of the landscape sloping and graceful, and the flowers beautiful. Of the approximately 89 bison in the refuge's growing herd, I saw a group of six on one hill and twenty-four, including several calves, on another. I found the place indescribable actually, but Hall's “striking” and “exhilarating” are probably as good as any word choices.

In *Errant Journeys*, author David Zunick credits fellow writer Yi Fu Tuan with introducing the term "topophilia to 'convey the affective bond between people and place'" (68). My sense of place was formed in a small Midwestern Mississippi River city, and my attachment to place developed there. Much of my writing has reflected a sense of place, but in recent years, I find it especially reflected in my literary nonfiction. Writing about the Midwest, especially the Mississippi River, and prompted by sudden onset of mid-life prairie topophilia, I began exploring our complex national relationship not only with the Mississippi, but with prairies also.

At that borderland of intellect and passion, explored by anthropologist and writer Ruth Behar in *The Vulnerable Observer*, prairie landscape has become part of the force driving my writing. Although a geographer, a "hard scientist," so to speak, "topophiliac" Yi Fu Tuan notes in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*: "If an experience resists ready communication, . . . a common response is to deem it private . . . and hence, unimportant. In the large literature of environmental quality, relatively few works attempt to understand how people feel about space and place . . ."(6). He also notes that the arts, including literature, have done better at recording such subtleties of human experience (7).

In terms of topophilia at least, Tuan attempts to deconstruct and reconcile the false dichotomy between art and science, to demonstrate that they need not conflict. Prairie, for example, gives the aesthetic reward of beauty as well as pragmatic, functional rewards of protection from erosion and species loss. The Herbert Hoover presidential legacy includes having “added 3 million acres to the National Park Service (expanding it by 40%) . . . and . . . 2.3 million acres to the U.S. Forest Service” (National Park Service). Preserving what little original prairie remains, while continuing to restore small and large expanses of this “profusion of light” is consistent with that legacy. This summer, at the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, I have witnessed part of a developing chapter in our national prairie narrative.

I want to thank the National Park Service rangers who welcomed me to the Herbert Hoover National Historic site and educated me about the prairie. I also want to thank the archivists at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library for their generous help with my research. - Gaynell Gavin

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Photographs of tallgrass prairie by Linda Staats, 2008 Artist-in-Residence. Painting of Herbert Hoover Birthplace Cottage by Julie Townsend, 1999 Artist-in-Residence.

Artists-in-Residence at Herbert Hoover National Historic Site

Herbert Hoover National Historic Site offers two residencies each of two to four weeks from May through September. Residencies are open to all professional American artists. The residencies allow selected artists to pursue their art forms in the contemplative setting of Herbert Hoover National Historic Site. The National Historic Site provides lodging and a secure, environmentally-controlled place to lay out equipment and supplies at no cost to the artist.

During the residencies, the artists interact informally with the public, present public interpretive programs, and produce a piece of artwork for the park's collection. Through their artwork, Artists-in-Residence provide opportunities for park visitors to make meaningful connections with the cultural and natural resources of the National Historic Site.

Gaynell Gavin's prose and poetry has been published in many literary journals and anthologies, including *Fourth Genre*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review* (Bellevue Literary Press), *Nebraska Presence* (Backwaters Press), and *Best New Poets 2006* (Samovar Press). Her poetry chapbook, *Intersections*, was published by Main Street Rag Publishing. Her essay, "What We Have," published in *Prairie Schooner*, was included among "Notable Essays " in *The Best American Essays 2009*. This essay, like much of her work, is grounded in the Midwest. She is originally from Illinois and is a faculty member at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina.

For more information about the Artist-in-Residence Program at Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, contact us at:

Herbert Hoover National Historic Site
110 Parkside Drive
PO Box 607
West Branch, IA 52358

(319) 643-2541
heho_interpretation@nps.gov
http://www.nps.gov/heho